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AUTHOR	Thoms, Karen Jarrett
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses motivation of adult learners. The first section discusses the adult learner, including the concepts of andragogy and pedagogy, as well as student-centered learning. The second section summarizes changing student demographics and predictions. The third section presents principles of adult learning. The fourth section covers characteristics of adult learners, including the following implications for developing effective training programs based on an understanding of adult learning: learning is not its own reward; adult learning is integrative; value adjustment; control; practices must be meaningful; and self-pacing. The fifth section suggests strategies to help motivate adult learners, including: put materials into bite-size chunks; use the whole-part-whole concept; make the material relevant; explain the relevance of assignments; provide documentation; let students work in groups; add options and flexibility in assignments; create a climate of exploration; keep requirements in perspective to the amount of time for the course; make certain the student is equipped with enough knowledge to complete the assignment; and bend the rules if necessary and appropriate. The sixth section addresses characteristics/skills of a motivating instructor in four categories, i.e., offering expertise, having empathy, showing enthusiasm, and demonstrating clarity. (Contains 15 references.) (MES)

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They're Not Just Big Kids: Motivating Adult Learners

Dr. Karen Jarrett Thoms
Professor, Learning Resources & Technology Services
Director, Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence
St. Cloud State University
720 Fourth Avenue South
St. Cloud, MN 56301-4498
(320) 654-5282
teaching@stcloudstate.edu

L. Lea

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With today's changing student population to include nontraditional, adult learners in nearly every higher education institution and program, it is necessary for faculty as well as administrators to recognize the learning and learning strategies which are appropriate for adult learners. Faculty can help students become more motivated, especially when they understand characterisitics of adult learners, motivation and its role in the workpace, strategies and activities for promoting motivation in adult learners, and key players in adult learning. This presentation addresses each of these areas.

Student populations are changing. We see adult learners in nearly every higher education institution andprogram. It is important that faculty recognize teaching and learning strategies appropriate to adult learners. Why? Because each year approximately 40 million adult Americans participate in educational activities (Wlodkowski, 1993, p. ix). This presentation will discuss the adult learner, andragogy, principles of adult education, characteristics of adult learners, strategies to help motivate adult learners, and characteristics and skills of a motivating instructor.

Adult Learners

Just what is an adult learner? Malcolm Knowles spent many years and a great deal of energy answering this question. According to Wlodkowski, Knowles identified adults by two criteria: an individual who performs roles associated by our culture with adults (worker, spouse, parent, soldier, responsible citizen) and an individual who perceives himself or herself to be responsible for his/her own life (1993, p. 5).

Andragogy and pedagogy refer to the study of teaching, "andra" meaning "man, adult," while "peda" meaning "child." Although pedagogy originated with early monks who recorded common characteristics among children who were learning basic facts, it was not until the middle of the 20th century that instructors realized their assumptions about how children learn did not apply to the adults they were teaching. Andragogy, the term first used in 1833 by a teacher in Germany, was reintroduced by a German social scientist in the 1920s, next adapted by adult educators in Europe in 1957, and finally brought to the United States (O'Connor, Bronner, and Delaney, 2002, p. 129). Knowles first used the term "andragogy" in America in the 1960s to reflect how adults learn. Andragogy recognizes the maturity of the learner, as discussed in Laird (1985, pp. 125-26) and:

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- is problem-centered rather than content-centered.
- permits and encourages active participation.
- encourages past experiences.
- is collaborative between instructor-student and student-student.
- is based on planning between the teacher and the learner.
- is based on an evaluation agreement.
- prompts redesign and new learning activities based on evaluation.
- incorporates experiential activities.

The comparison of androgogy and pedagogy has shown us that early activities needto allow maximum participation by learners so they can invest their experience and values in the the learning process (Laird, p. 125). Laird also points out that andragogic instructors use more questions simply because adult learns **do** know a great deal. Laird (p. 126) points out that the primary function of the instructor of adults is to manage, or guide, andragogic processes, not to manage the content, which is the traditional approach in pedagogy.

Student-centered learning, also known as learner-centered education, has been and is still very strong in the American education system (Jarvis, Holford, and Griffin). What does this mean to educators? When examining adult education/learning, we must look at student demographics and predictions, principles of adult learning, characteristics of the adult learner, strategies used when teaching adults, and strategies to motivate adult learners. It means that early activities in the training/education experience allow for maximum participation by the learners, thus supporting active learning strategies. Laird (p. 126) writes of the need for the adult learner to be actively involved in establishing the learning objectives; as an instructor, however, beware of the temptation to let the students "call the shots" where the outcome might be a digression from the original (and curriculum-committee approved) intent and goals of the course or training.

Andragogic sessions vary significantly from pedagogic classes. While there continues to be an increase in the number and degrees of active learning activities taking place in K-12, the college and training arenas may far surpass the learners' understandings of what may and may not be negotiated as far as objectives, activities, etc. According to Laird (p. 126), andragogy raises interesting questions about the role of the instructor. As stated previously, in andragogy, the role of the instructor is to **manage** the processes, but **not** to manage the content. Two-way communication and feedback is critical. Instructors may serve as facilitators rather than lecturers. They may routinely switch between teaching strategies. For instructors, this change to the andragogic level of teaching may require a major adjustment to their teaching strategies.

O'Connor, Bronner, and Delaney summarize adult learning by stating (2002, pp. 127-28):

Individual adults learn differently, depending upon their experience, aptitude, and attitude. When you learn best in a classroom environment, by reading a book, or through Web-based training, depends on a number of elements. These include . . . your individual characteristics, the perceived value

of the learning task to you, and how much experience . . .
you have had with the topic in the past.

If the pedagogical/andragogical comparisons are made, the learning concepts and assumptions generated by these two points of view differ substantially. The conditions that are manipulated (process elements) differ in respect to **who** controls them, according to O'Connor et al.

Changing Student Demographics and Predictions

Loden and Rosener (1991) addressed how Workforce America would change during the 1990s. It was predicted that by the year 2000 we would see more women in the classroom, more international and minorities/persons of color in the classroom, more students holding full-time jobs, more one-parent households consisting of a student parent, and greater need for "services" such as child care. If we look around our classrooms in 2001, we are very likely to see that these predictions have become reality. And we are seeing a significant increase in the number of adult learners, regardless of gender or ethnicity.

Principles of Adult Learning

There are many principles associated with adult learning. A compilation of these principles is detailed below. Instructors of adult learners need to keep in mind that they should:

- present information in a manner that permits mastery. This means "bit-size chunks" of information rather than everything in one huge swoop.
- present new information if it is meaningful and practical. If the learner sees no connection between the job/course and the activities, that person will very likely lose interest and not succeed in the class.
- present only one idea or concept at a time. Show how one step progresses to the next.
- use feedback/frequent summarization. Make sure you (the instructor) lets the adult learner know what is being done correctly, and keep the summaries of completed activities alive and strong as reinforcement.
- practice learning as a self-activity. If they prefer to learn on their own, see if this is possible in the course without sacrificing in-class activities and their benefits.
- accept that people learn at different rates. Some people will have to be told two or three times how to do a task, others will have to be shown rather than told, and they may have to be shown only once or four or five times.
- recognize that learning is continuous/continual. We keep passing over plateaus and obstacles, but sometimes learners get bogged down or stopped. And then they start up again and begin the learning process again.
- believe that learning results from stimulation. We need to show students that this learning is beneficial to them, and we must set the stage for their success, including stimulating them to continue.

- enhance learning through positive reinforcement. Tell the adult learners, tell all learners in fact, what they are doing correctly. Build on the idea that we all like to succeed.
- follow the concept that people learn by doing. Keep them working, giving them hands-on experiences whenever possible, especially ones which parallel their work environment.
- desires the "whole-part-whole" learning strategy. Show examples of how this new skill or knowledge can be used, then move to the detail portions, and finally reinforce with another set of examples of the entire range of skills and knowledges and how they are used.
- supports the team environment to improve learning. Some people like to work in groups/teams, because that emulates the traditional workplace situation. However, trouble can brew if these learners, especially the adult learners, are expected to meet outside of class to work on group projects.
- knows that training/education must be properly timed. Introduce the training or education immediately preceding their need. Do not try to teach a person a new computer software application and then not have it available for 6-8 months back at their job.

Characteristics of Adults Learners

Adult learners may be easy to spot (often we are the ones with grey hair), and at other times it is more difficult to determine which of our students can be categorized as "adult learners." Some faculty consider college students to be adult learners because of the definitions identified above. Many college students are employed (often as full-time employees), have a spouse, may have one or more children, vote, serve on community committees, volunteer regularly, and are responsible for their own lives. We are seeing a higher percentage each year of our student population fitting into this category. Few of us consider our college students to be merely an extension of the K-12 group. In addition, those institutional staff and faculty working with training and faculty development need to keep in mind that their patrons or clients are adults and need to be treated as such when they take part in training activities.

Just what makes these adults so different from K-12 students, thus requiring trainers, instructional designers, and teachers to move from pedagogic to andragogic teaching/learning strategies when working with them? The following composite list is arranged in no particular order. They do, however, describe many of our adult learners. Thus, characteristics of adult learners include some of the following attributes:

- have first-hand experience.
- have set habits and strong tastes.
- have a great deal of pride, but their ways of "showing it" varies.
- have tangible things to lose so are very cautious in the educational environment.
- have preoccupations outside the learning environment.
- may be bewildered by options (sometimes).

- have developed group behavior consistent with their needs.
- have established a rational framework (values, attitudes, etc.)
- by which they make decisions.
- respond to reinforcement, especially positive reinforcement.
- have a strong feeling about the learning situation.
- in most cases can (and want to) change to better themselves.
- may have prejudices which are detrimental to the learning environment or to the institution.
- learn from reinforcement (thrive on it).
- have a strong need to apply what is learned — and apply it **now**!
- want to be competent in their application of knowledge and skill.
- want a choice in what they learn.
- like their "creature comforts" in room, furniture, equipment, HVAC, and refreshments.

Most adult learners bring a great deal of first-hand experience to the workplace; this can be a real asset during discussion times, or it can be a hindrance, and the effective instructor must know how to encourage as well as to curb "This is how we did it . . . ." discussions. Many adult learners also have set habits and strong tastes, which may be beneficial if the habit supports a strong work ethic or may be a hindrance during a required diversity training workshop.

O'Connor et al (pp. 131-32) carry the adult learning theories into the training arena. They define six implications for developing effective training programs, based on an understanding of adult learning.

Learning is not its own reward. Children and adults learn for different reasons. Adults are not impressed or motivated by gold stars and good report cards. Instead, they want a learning outcome which can be put to use immediately, in concrete, practical, and self-benefiting terms. Adult learners want practical, hands-on training sessions over general, theory-oriented classes. For example, the best way to motivate adults to learn a spreadsheet software package is to show them how they can use it in their own environment.

Adult learning is integrative. The adult learner brings a breadth of knowledge and a vast array of experiences to the learning situation. Adults learn best when they use what they already know and integrate new knowledges and skills into this bank of knowledge. In the event this new knowledge or skill is in direct opposition to what the learner already knows or believes, there is a possibility of conflict, which must be addressed immediately.

Value adjustment. Because training changes how work is processed, the adult learner must understand **why** the learning is useful and **why** these new skills must be mastered. Value adjustment means understanding why work that has been done a particular way in the past will not be performed in the same way in the future. Adult learners must be

convinced this change is for the betterment of the organization.

Control. Adult learners want control over their learning experiences. In K-12 learning, the teacher tells the students what to do, being very specific about assignments and expectations. Adult learning encourages collaboration with trainees about the pace and the content of the training curriculum. Adult learners in a college classroom can frequently be given more flexibility in determining their assignments, with the understanding that the basic criteria for the assignment must be met.

Practice must be meaningful. Repetition for the sake of repetition just does not "cut it" with adult learners, and it is unlikely that learning will take place. If repetition, however, does have meaningful results, then learning will take place. Adults frequently tend to be slower in some physical, psychomotor tasks than children. The adults are also less willing to make mistakes (someone might see them make this mistake), and they often compenstate by being more exact. In other words, they may take less "chances" with trial-and-error activities, thus making few mistakes. Send these adult learners home to their work station or with an assignment that will parallel what they have just learned. Because the adult learner does **not** want to make mistakes, especially on an assignment, might explain why adult learners tend to ask for clarification on assignments more often than traditional learners.

Self-pacing. Because adult learners acquire psychomotor skills more slowly than younger students, adults should be given the opportunity to proceed at their own pace, often in a self-paced learning package. Can self-paced activities always be integrated into the curriculum? No, and this is definitely a challenge to an instructor where there is a mix of adult and traditional learners.

Strategies to Help Motivate Adult Learners

Although what and how people learn is beyond guarantee or total prediction, we **can** make suggestions which might be effective strategies and guidelines to use with adult learners. The suggestions, attributed to no particular authors or sources but rather construed by the author of this article/presentation, include the following:

- put materials into "bite-size chunks" which people are able to understand.
- use the whole-part-whole concept, showing the overall picture followed by the details and then a refresher with the overall picture.
- make the material relevant, as close to the actual requirements of that person's job.
- explain **why** certain assignments are made and their relevance to the overall course or training sessions.
- provide plenty of documentation for the learner, usually in the form of hands-on experience and paper documentation.
- let the students work in groups, since they would rather ask other students for assistance rather than ask the course instructor.

- add a little "spice to their life" by giving them some degree of options and flexibility in their assignments.
- create a climate of "exploration" rather than one of "prove it."
- keep the course requirements in perspective to the amount of time for the course (credit hours, for example).
- make certain the student is equipped with enough knowledge and skill to complete the assignment, rather than setting the person up for failure.
- bend the rules, if necessary and appropriate, so that the adult learner can "push the envelope" and try new things.

By being flexible and willing to adapt to the needs of the adult learners, the instructor can be a motivating force in the classroom — rather than a hindrance and demotivator.

Characteristics/Skills of a Motivating Instructor

Most of us have had at least one motivating instructor who helped us want to learn the material which was presented. Stop and think about the qualities or characteristics of that motivating instructor. Could/do you possess some of those characteristics? Do you **want** to possess some of those same characteristics which motivated you as a learner? Although motivating instructors give us that special desire to learn and they have their own personal strengths and style, there are some common characteristics which can be learned, controlled, and planned for by anyone who instructs adults. Wlodkowski (p. 17) identifies these four cornerstones as expertise, emphathy, enthusiasm, and clarity. These skills can be learned and they can be improved upon through practice and effort. Charactertistics/skills of a motivating instructor can be classified by four categories:

- offers expertise, both in knowledge and preparation.
- has empathy, which includes understanding and consideration.
- shows enthusiasm, for the course, content, students, and profession of teaching.
- demonstrates clarity, whether it be in classroom teaching, explanation of assignments, or classroom discussion.

Offering Expertise. This is the power of knowledge and preparation, although it is also known as competence, substance, content, or experience. According to Wlodkowski (p. 17), the practical definition of expertise is three-fold: we know something beneficial to the student; we have a thorough grasp of the content, and we can and are prepared to convey this information through an instructional process. We must keep in mind that some of our adult students will have experiences, often first-hand experiences, which are relevant to the topic at hand and in greater detail than that of the instructor. Just our name and title will not impress them, but our actual experience might. Usually adult learners have a set agenda for being in a learning environment: they want this newly acquired skill or knowledge to help them solve a problem at work, build on already existing skills, learn new skills, advance in their jobs, upgrade to a new job, or get promoted. As the instructor of adults, it is imperative that we be able to offer them concrete examples involving the information or skill which they are learning. The knowledge or skill which we offer to teach these adult learners must be well mastered; we cannot walk into the classroom and "wing it" with this group of learners. In other words, we need the background as well as

the skill to "think on our feet" as we answer questions, and if we are teaching them a skill, we should be able to demonstrate it. In addition to our expertise with the content, we must also be able to convey this knowledge through an effective instructional process. Just because the instructor knows the content does not necessary mean that person is an effective teacher. Being well prepared is vital, but instructors must also be familiar and comfortable with the wide variety of instructional strategies they have at their disposal.

Having Empathy. The more the student needs and expectations are met, the more motivated they may be to learn. Thus, students need to investigate the course in which they are enrolling to determine that it is what is expected. Unfortunately, not all classes are optional, and students may have to enroll in courses which they do not want to take. Or, they may have to take a course from an instructor who is a second or third choice, one who has teaching strategies which are different from the students' learning preferences. According to Wlodkowski, empathy is the skill that allows instructors to meet the adult learner's needs and perceptions for motivating instruction (p. 24). What does this mean to us as instructors? It **may** mean we have to modify our teaching preferences to include instructional strategies which are more acceptable to the adult learner(s).

One of the more troublesome issues of adult learners has to do with what activities and how much time and other resources can they be expected to commmit. We as faculty may have an understanding of what the student needs to know and be able to do at the completion of the course, but does that student have that same understanding? Oftentimes they do not. The major obstacle for these adult learners is time—they just do not have the time to commit to endless hours of outside class activities and assignments. For that reason, faculty must be absolutely clear in their expectations (syllabus and assignments sheet) and require only work which demonstrates mastery or meeting of an objective. We all want our students (adult and otherwise) to succeed, so give students a reasonable amount of work, and make sure these assignments are within their grasp. Do not make the work so difficult that the learners face failure with every passing week in the class.

Empathy involves the human factor associated with learning; it is separate from the computers, the software programs, the attendance requirements, the late fees for late assignments, etc. Empathy does include flexibility, an understanding that babies **do** come early and miss the spring break by four days (thus the student misses a week of class), families experience the death of a friend or loved one, knowledge that a blizzard keeps a 70-mile commuter at home rather than face slipping into a ditch, or having compassion for a student who has just suffered a miscarriage. Some teachers will argue that these situations should not impact a student's educational path, but reality convinces us that they actually do. Naturally, our adult learners often have more complex situations with which to deal than do our more traditional learners.

Showing Enthusiasm. Have you ever noticed that when we talk about something for which we have a great deal of interest, we get more excited, more vocal, more demonstrative? Of course we have. This strong excitement or interest on behalf of a topic or cause is natural for most of us. Wlodkowski (p. 29) takes this definition further by saying enthusiasm is

> . . . the person's inner feelings as they are expressed in outward behavior. An enthusiastic instructor is a person who cares about and values his subject matter and teaches it in a manner that expresses those feelings with the intent to encourage similar feelings in the learner. Emotion, energy, and animation are outwardly visible in this person's instruction.

Demonstrating Clarity. Demonstrating clarity is really the power of language and organization. It can also be defined as "thinking on your feet" or articulating well. This final cornerstone is absolutely critical in teaching adult learners. Certain words such as "um" or "ah" spoken a couple of times in an answer to a question leaves serious doubts in the adult learner's mind regarding the competence of the instructor. The instructor would probably be wise to stop for just a minute, phrase the answer clearly mentally, and **then** answer the question or give a response.

Along with the formation of a response also follows the whole idea that a presentation must be well planned and well orchestrated. Our delivery of content must be thorough, fluid, and understandable.

Conclusion

This presentation/paper has included information which will help instructors be more effective when teaching adult learners. We have discussed the adult learner, andragogy, principles of adult education, characteristics of adult learners, strategies to help motivate adult learners, and characteristics and skills of a motivating instructor. By practicing some of these guidelines and by sharing this information with others on our campuses, higher education may be able to take a giant step forward as it strives to address the specific needs of the adult learners.

Suggested Resources and Useful Reading

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